



MY FRIENDS: HERE COME THE BRIDES (AND GROOMS)

–Fr. Patrick Kennedy

Recently I was waiting for some people to join me in a local eatery for dinner. I was early so I went to the bar to wait, ordering my usual libation and nursing it until the others arrived. As I was sitting there, I could not help but be distracted by the five people planted right next to me at a table that was no more than an arm away. At first I was oblivious to what they were saying, but they began talking quite loudly. I couldn't help overhearing that they were planning a wedding or at least part of it. There was a young couple, obviously the bride and groom. There was an older couple, (truth be told I think they were younger than I), who appeared to be the mother and father of the bride. Then there was another man who had his hands on a laptop and was asking all sorts of questions about music and clicking away as they spoke.

The mother was the most vocal of the five and the loudest. It seemed she was directing the conversation. The father looked over a couple of times and seemed like he would rather be having a snifter with me than listening to all the details unfolding about the wedding reception. The groom kept saying, "Whatever you want." I am not sure if it was directed toward the mother of the bride or the bride herself.

At one point the minstrel coordinating the after-dinner part of the evening said, "When you get to the reception, it will be time to kick up the energy a bit. You will have just come from the church, and those in attendance at the service will need to be revived afterward." "No offense," he added, "but most people don't get into the church service part. You and your immediate families are probably the only ones who care. It is a low-energy affair, and the crowd will need some excitement when they come into the hall."

I played the words back and forth in my mind. "The church service is a low-energy affair, and most people in attendance don't get into it." At that point, I thought about intruding and introducing myself, but then I thought better of it. Plus, my friends had arrived and sat down, so I gave them my full attention.

The wedding season is upon us. Young people, and some people young at heart, are in the midst of planning what they express is the most important event of their lives. From the time the engagement is announced and the ring is placed on the finger of the bride-to-be, it seems like the pace picks up, and it is a mad dash until the last dog is hung, and the bride and groom are on their way out of town for the honeymoon.

I do not want to appear defensive here. But the reason I would have intruded would be to explain that the church service IS the main event and all the rest of what happens that day is, excuse the expression, frosting on the cake.

When an engagement is announced, somebody close by always says, "We need to call the church and check out the dates." This is the first of many times when the church begins its essential role in uniting this man and woman in the Sacrament of Marriage. When the call is made to Pax Christi, we also lay out for the couple the things we ask them to become involved in as they prepare for the wedding and married life that will follow.

There are many staff members and parishioners who assist the couples who come and ask Pax Christi Catholic Community to be the place they are married. Most of the time, they begin by encountering Kim Grams who coordinates the logistics of getting the couple to meet with myself, Deacon Al, or the visiting clergy who will witness the marriage. She also works with the couple in getting the documentation ready, like baptismal certificates and the wedding license. She arranges the calendar, dates, and times for the wedding and rehearsal. She works with and schedules wedding coordinators who will provide hospitality to the bride, groom, and their families at the rehearsal and at the wedding.

Early, after the bride and groom call for a date, they begin a process of preparation. The centerpiece of this process is meeting with a group of well-trained and dedicated parishioners who will lead them through a tool entitled PREPARE. These PREPARE couples, with loads of experience of married life, begin by meeting with the wedding couple and giving them a written inventory filled with statements about the bride and groom themselves, their individual families, their future spouse, their feelings about the church, and their hopes and dreams as they come together to build their future. The people involved in this ministry do a wonderful job helping the couples going through the process know their strengths and limitations as they learn what this commitment is they are undertaking and saying yes to. PREPARE couples share the experience of their own married life in showing a reality to what this bride and groom may experience in the future and possible ways to deal with the things that get in their way of being successful.

During this time of preparation, the couple is invited along with other couples preparing for marriage to meet with those responsible for the liturgy, whether it is a Mass or prayer service. In my mind, contrary

to what a DJ or wedding planner may believe, the liturgy and expression of what it means is the heart of the wedding celebration.

When two people state publicly they want to share their life together, they do it in the context of a deeper meaning. From the beginnings of our sacred history, recorded in the Scripture and proclaimed to us today, individuals are reminded of the past and encouraged as they begin to forge their lives together as husband and wife. The story of Jesus is profound in the sense that He invited all of His followers to fulfill the command to love one another, even giving us the example that there is nothing more life-giving than to lay down one's life for another.

While there are plenty of examples of this expression of love shown by individuals throughout history, married life, lived well and graciously through the good times and bad, adds a particular eloquence to this lofty ideal of the giving of self to another. Anybody married for more than one day knows the adventure embarked upon is not going to be easy. Like all vocations the essence of success is found in admitting honestly to oneself that this is the case. But the grace of this Sacrament is operative when two people, each day, can rely not only on themselves to make things work and flourish in married life but also on the deeper relationship with God through the Spirit of Jesus who motivates each of them to take things one day at a time and work to make the effort to grow in love with each other.

Maybe that is why I reacted when I heard the line about the "liturgy being a low-energy affair." It made me ponder how well we actually prepare couples who come to us for marriage. While I believe there can always be room for improvement, I think that the many people involved in our ministry to the engaged are doing a wonderful job. I am humbled and ever grateful for these parishioners and staff who share their time and wisdom with these fledgling wives and husbands.

A few weeks ago, I was privileged to be with two people who have been married for 69 years. We celebrated the anniversary with liturgy and a nuptial blessing more for thanksgiving than a hope the marriage would succeed because you knew it had. Surrounded by their kids and grandkids and some friends, we looked back as this aging couple now looks forward. What struck me most about being in their presence was how the joys and sad things of life never seem to deter them from the commitment they made to each other 69 years ago. It seemed these moments of shared life together made them stronger individuals to serve each other year in and year out and find the true meaning of what married life is all about.

Weddings and the planning of them are pivotal moments in the lives of families and the two individuals wanting to get married. But as I sat in the bar that night listening to another perspective of what "we" do and thought about it later, I am convinced that we here at Pax Christi work very hard to help couples discover and appreciate themselves, the hopes they have as they become engaged, the strength the Church and God can be for them all the days of their married life, and that their wedding day is just one in many they will have together to show their love for each other. The energy we expend in helping couples get off on the right foot has never been half-hearted. The people working in our Marriage Preparation Ministry give it their all in the hope that the two individuals will realize through our example and care that this is ultimately what marriage is all about.